



Rusty Barnes

Redneck Poems



Poems

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Hollywood Appalachian Noir: A Lesson

A Haitian moon shines over the lower holler,
I say, like the moon in a low fog.
Last week's garbage sidles slowly down the bank
of the gully where Grampa's thrown his trash
for the last 44 years. Shit, Mandy says, you
wouldn't know a Haitian moon if it hit you bang
between the eyes. You haven't been out
of these United States your entire life.

True, I say, but I know a Haitian moon when
I see one. Outside a paradiddle of skunks lie
in wait for Uncle Bill and his family to dump
their weekly coffee grounds and melon rinds.
They look like waiters in a fancy hotel I'd never
enter for fear of seeming—out of place. Mandy
is out under the moon in her barefeet and daisy
dukes, laughing up a jig with my clodhopper
friend Vaughan who is also waiting for melons,
but of a different kind. I love my wife and Vaughan,
but with his sweat-thick hair and brandy snifter ways
like having a job and cold green in his pocket,
whiskey he doesn't have to color with tobacco
and all the white teeth in sweet red gums
he didn't have to pay for on a plan but was born
with. All the teeth in the world won't save him.

Tonight when he drops his hands from Mandy's waist
to the fine and dimpled rounds of her buttocks I will
clock him from behind like clockwork with the subtle
knife of my intentions, which are to cold-cock him
and tie him pantsless to the hood of his BMW,
parade him through our small town like the cuckold
he tried to make of me, a specter of shame before all
the townspeople who elected him Selectman. How
they will titter and laugh behind their hands. Mandy
will run to me with the open arms of the reconciled
wife. Now Vaughan has done the deed he threatened
to do and I rise in my overalls and spotted t-shirt,
drain my beer and lift my arm to do him harm. But o
that dame Mandy, so saucy in her pink muff-diving t-shirt,
lifting her arm and canting her hip sideways in that reflexive
move that beautiful women with ample posteriors

are often born with, and I am distracted. Vaughan turns round and strokes my jaw loose on its strings with his hard-working fist. I am no hand at the arts of mayhem, I fear.

Soon I am ass-over-teakettle and not even Patrick Swayze can save me now. Vaughan kicks me into next week, from which I write this verse. Cousin, don't mess with a ridgerunner woman. They will do you till you forget your name then drop you for another man. You will wake with a knot in your jaw and a pain in your crotch, a bulldog named Lester slopping your nose with wet kisses, the brutal truth stuck in your skull like knowledge of God and the way babies learn to lodge under your skin and never leave. There are fifty thousand things in these hills you can name and know by doing so, but not one single thing in the city you live who can stare back at you and say the same.



How One Word Connotes a Star

Great White sang something about traveling
across your state line. You'd recently
demilitarized your zone with a razor. The idea
had some appeal. Your sunflashed dad and his short-
barreled shotgun proved us too young. I slipped
my cold hand hipward and he busted out the door
in sweatpants and a camo jacket to say
Nice night kids. Lookit that moon!
Hitched his pants skyward and coughed.
I returned my hand to your safe shoulder.
He went to bed dog-howling nervous;
the bedroom light stayed on all week.
In the night sky your navel supernovaed
to the rhythm of my probing tongue
and flared like cinnamon in my mouth.
We lit out for a galaxy of trembling we
worked all night to reach it while the stars
tittered behind their stone-white hands.

Summer, Shelling Peas

There are old ladies all along
this stretch of road shelling peas
into plastic buckets in the late
five 'o'clock heat and you sit on
this porch in a lawn chair with one
your cutoff jeans and halter top
out of place horribly
in the chaff-dust day
the peas like tiny hearts
in your hand. You roll them out
of the pod with your thumb
and they tinkle like rain
into the bucket. We drink
iced tea and eat chips
as the last strains of daylight
fall. We play euchre under
the bug-zapper at the picnic table
and later that night I take
your thumb into my mouth
and taste you,
and the good earth.

The Appassionata of Spring

Spring weather came. Rain pocked into
the dust like tiny explosions of clarity.

Just after the rain a single bee
returned agitated and cumbersome

from its far-off pollen gathering.
You and I have met here at the abandoned

house, under the bushy lilac, every
afternoon for a week, shaking off the buzz,

the ordure of growing things—the gnats
in our faces. Every time we come together

and wetly separate you stretch over our heads
and adorn a lilac branch with condoms

of varying colors. Someday if we do not
stop this entire bush will be an alien thing

to be gazed at from the distance of our lives,
a thing to be wondered at by landscapers

or boys who mow our lawn and trim
our hedge. Who would do such a thing

and why, as if the reasons we act can
at all be tied to things like logic? We can

only inarticulate ourselves by means
of the body: that slow thump of cells

and hormones co-creating themselves
in rain (like movies), in the sharp dab

of purple flowers divesting themselves
from their maker to adorn our faces

for the brief time we will spend here loving
before we become stone and ether,

before we return from where we came
so many years ago: purple blooms bursting

from our eyes—beautiful lesions—and the way
we are marked by love and returned to water,

and how that water surpasses all understanding
and flows in directions we cannot see, toward home.



Ode to _____

Tony little girls in slim skirts
never really appealed; give
me bluesgals with high stock-
ings and lovely round thighs
at two ayem in a stripmall
parking lot in Modesto CA
where we've been tattooed
by Jimmy with the lobe-
stretchers and those cool
blue eyes who parted your
legs with more patience
than I'd have given another
situation. Yeah, boy.

A woman I barely know called
me cowboy tonight. I auto-denied
it; but she's right. Nothing I'd like
better than a woman in a sunset
scene straddling a fence: the old
black and white version. That's
the way you tell old cowboy
movies from the new: In the old
ones cowboys kiss the girl
and ride the horse into the setting
sun. And in a new one—they get
poor quality tats in Modesto.

Fuck it. I can't listen when you
chew my ear. I don't have a horse
but you can ride with me. Somewhere
at the end of the line I'll carry you
across the threshold of a sideroad
motel and kiss you into next Tuesday.
Just don't take off that garter belt.

Rebellion of the Flesh

for Laurel

Like a duck stepping out of its feathers,
skinned by mere air, a thumping heart
beating only by catheter and stent and
pacemaker/the breathy falsetto promises
of your children, must pucker its walls,
push oxygenated blood on its last ride.

She put the new baby in your bruised arms.
You held her like a badly potted plant,
then gave her back after a fashion—I took
her from you. It's clear we're near
the end. The palliative team arrives too
late; all of you in tears now. Soon comes
the fallen chest that will not rise. Outside
a crane swings wide over the Charles River.
There is a saving grace: tomorrow,
you'll remember nothing, nor need
anything. Fiat lux.



When the Wrong Words Get Said

Car-tire against gravel,
rough smell of beer
and roasted corn,
heat-lightning like a sine
wave loops across a pit
of gray sky between pole-light
and the quiet barn;
the low of cows,
moonshine slips in like a tongue
through the treeless hedge fence;
the empty faces of women glow,
a child in shirtsleeves gums an apple
while the mutt runs a rough circle
around the feet of your friends,
pissing every time someone raises a hand.
Your wife says fuck it. Goes to bed.
Shuts the door. Says go ahead and drink.
Be with your friends.

Wrong words get said.
Your head breaks like a fist
against a stone wall,
knuckles feeding fire.
Somewhere the swollen lips
of angels call you home,
but before you go smash-mouthed
in to the house to watch your kids breathe,
stagger into your marital bed,
you tongue-kiss a seventeen-year-old,
realize the sweetness in her mouth
is your own blood.

Redneck at the Open Mic



My poem this evening is called shirtsleeves,
because the woman I've been fashioning
intercourse with over these last few years
took offense to something I said in the slow
steam of sad anger and cut the arms out
of them all the way to the pits. I tried my best
to reason with her about the way she behaves
toward me but she hauled off and hung a shot
glass between my eyes. It was best that I leave
so I did, rubbing the hurt place on my nose.
I did not go to the bar, cheery place though
it is. I called my old man who has been married
for fifty years and asked him what to do. He
suggested I take up with other married men
to commiserate, to talk shit about women,
he said. I don't know any other married men,
I said. He said sucks to be you. I wandered
into my neighbor Howard Wu's yard. He grilled
some fish and some hot dogs as I ranted at him.
I could hear the crashing of dresser drawers
from our house. Woooo, Howard said. She sure
pissed at you. I thought of all the many things
this woman could be. Pissed was just the first
thing that came to mind. I felt like crying in
the ocean and coming home to an empty house
was not among my favorite things. So I hitched
my drawers and went home, and I sat down at
my bare-ass kitchen table and wrote this as she
moved her stuff all around the living room in boxes.
I wanted to say nice things to her but nothing
I mean nothing came to mind. I looked in a great
gilt-edged mirror and saw only myself, in ripped
shirtsleeves with a red mark between my eyes.
Can you believe that shit?

High School Chick Fight

I thought it was a trick of the light,
silvered wink in a dark hallway,

rish and *schuss* of under-breathed
talking—the long huffing pant

of someone out of shape. I caught
an earring as I noticed by the reek

of perfume these were girls. I admit
to yelling CHICKFIGHT! and settling back

against the concrete wall to watch.
I am not proud; these are just details,

like how the younger smaller girl
sunfished her way out from under

the big girl and came up with a knife,
one wild slash on a roll of fat (what

we learned later in Biology was called
not fat but panniculus instead). How

the blood looked like a birthday present
as the big girl stared at her tummy,

began to cry. It was over. Later, the small
girl cracked a plateful of spaghetti over

the big girl's face and scarred her for life.
I learned the small girl's name: Faith.

I fell in love with her soon after. After we necked
in my father's Fairlane, I went too far of course.

Her cool fingers marked the side of my neck.
I released from her crotch and panicked, began

to watch for it; the sharp right hand, the blade,
the brick I could not see as I bruised her shoulder

and breasts with my mouth again and again as she
breathed my name, and I waited for the knife to come.

The Electric Fence

Some say this is a rural legend.
There's a field of three boys
one younger, two older
facing the Holsteins across a single
wire stretched hip-high, twisted taut
around a white spool nailed
to a rough-grained wooden fence post.
You can see what's coming, no?
Look among you, ladies, for the man
rubbing his thigh. He really wants
to grab himself and gurggle his pain
like the slit-throat cat these boys left behind
an hour past but he can't, the way he
would if he were among only men,
where they bond over killings,
warm blood on their hands.
Don't worry though.
The youngest of these boys, when
forced on his face in a dirty mattress
later on by the other two boys,
will forget the bloody cat and only
remember the way they said go ahead
I dare you. Whip it out and piss on that wire.
It feels good. And how he did.



Cutter

Between the witching hour and its successor,
I caught her with my utility knife in the open closet,

drawing a dark rill of blood from her forearm;
I watched unsure of what to say or do, frozen,

more or less, in the mountain of air separating us.
Wise words slipped from my mouth like indigo birds

into the caries-colored early evening, supported by
nothing I could draw on from reality. In the end,

this poem will rise and fall on the relative success
of what I should have said, known, thought, or taught.

Before. Instead things fall apart as I grasp her
by the forearm, press the brachial artery and try

to ignore her pleading, I just want to die, then Daddy,
then Daddy again. When all the bad things happen

in the world, someone told me once, God's heart is the first
to crack, but no one, no thing breaks our silent lock.

I hold her in my arms; my hand fills with her blood.
Her pale face a giant tear. Her blood sauna-warm.

I wish I could say something shifted in me too.
But I just wanted my daughter to be well enough

to someday peek at me over the edge of a book
and smile.

On a Miscarriage

She swept chaff from the hardwood floor,
a cloud of gnats descending a line of light

from the hole in the ceiling and roof to buzz
around the hats of the four men gathered

to play euchre and jaw their tobacco-spit into
Folger's coffee cans saved from the recycling bin.

Thinking had never saved her before, not when
the big truck payment came due with both bank

account and glove box dry as a dog's mid-summer
mouth, nor when the entire litter of champion

blueticks came down mysteriously with parvo,
shitting themselves to death in a week and a half.

None of it worth questioning, she thought, while
raising enough dust in the living room to make

her husband Rick cough vilely in the kitchen. Rick
spat a loogie between his thighs as Silent Dan flipped

over his last three cards and smiled, left bower,
right bower, ace. You take em, I'll rake em, Rick said.

Outside the piss-yellow moon fucked against the sky.
She thought of the children lost in the night by blood

and by accident and by God. The stars don't twinkle,
she thought. They stick up there out of pure love

or out of cussedness. All those dead babies up there,
she thought. They dare not fall to earth, ever ever again.

Behold the Starry Ego

A strength woman with six fingers
massaged my ego last night. I joined
the starry firmament once she'd finished.

I could spend my life there coalescing into
deep-matter somewhere the other side of
Tau Ceti or I might stay here where I am, she said.

I set my skin on fire first then tabulated chances
in a spreadsheet once I'd figured out the formula
(col. A + col. B=fuckit). My dermis glowed like

Newcastle before I stopped. Could I stay here
in this place just waiting for a happy ending?
No one wants to be a star. You pulse for

years; no one notices your light until
you're already dead. Screw that noise,
I thought. Disengaging her services

proved troublesome until I gave her my cock
ring. She clapped her hands in a paroxysm of joy.
She said yes. Together we fight the fight the poor fight,

simple stars gathering together to shine
for vague purpose; we shave our bodies raw.
Our inner glow revealed by razor is just stunning.



The Ex-Boyfriend Checks In on Saturday Night by Cell Phone

Remind me never to call you
again after you get home late,
for the familiar fear of the deadbolt noise,
the shifty creak of your linoleum floor,
the way you throw your jacket over
the sofa and slide from your shoes
like a tap dancer long and slow,
the way you rattle the bowl

with beer-piss knowing that I'll crawl
between your ankles anyway,
part your legs and lips like the leaves
of an old familiar book whose margins
I've creased with my fingers and closed
with the certain knowledge I'd open it soon
and feel my way through the details
by heart. It's not genteel; it's what I know.
Baby, I'd eat your words raw.

I don't like those noises in the hum of your line.

Here I am hawk-eared to my cell,
finger stuck in my off ear waiting
to hear you answer and nothing
picks up but my tension, the hillbilly
band in the background twanging
into their next set. There are twenty women,
open books, I don't want to talk
with here and eighteen men with cutthroat
late-night hearts and cash to spare.
Me with a dollar or two or my own
cold need worth nothing but gas money,
maybe a pat on the ass. While you're banging
heels on his ass I can leave with women
I don't want or go home to drink
another beer in front of the TV.

That choice is easy. Susana's alone
at the bar skinny-legged in her jeans
and long hair loose. While her cunt
warms beneath me I'll write a new chapter
in her lovely body but I know me.
In the morning I'll close the book.
Forget every word. Yeah.
Remind me to leave a message
next time. I'll say please baby—pick it up.



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Rusty Barnes grew up in rural northern Appalachia. He received his B.A. from Mansfield University of Pennsylvania and his M.F.A. from Emerson College. His fiction, poetry and non-fiction have appeared in over a hundred fifty journals and anthologies. After editing fiction for the Beacon Street Review (now Redivider) and Zoetrope All-Story Extra, he co-founded Night Train, a literary journal which has been featured in the Boston Globe, The New York Times, and on National Public Radio. Sunnyoutside Press published a collection of his flash fiction, *Breaking it Down*, in November 2007. His collection of traditional fiction, *The Ground Always Gives Way*, will be published by Sunnyoutside Press in early 2011. His recently completed novel, tentatively titled "Three of a Kind," is about northern Appalachia, family and community dynamics, sex, drugs, and not so much rock 'n' roll.